

Operatives, Spies and Saboteurs: The Unknown Story of the Men and Women of World War II's OSS

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Patrick K. O'Donnell. New York: Free Press, 2004. 365 pages.

Reviewed by Clayton D. Laurie

With the number of books that have appeared on the OSS since the CIA first began declassifying its records some 30 years ago, it would seem an impossible task to find a new approach. Yet Patrick O'Donnell has found a fresh angle by focusing on the reminiscences of 300 OSS veterans. In first-person accounts, ranging in length from a paragraph to several pages, these veterans vividly describe their wartime clandestine service overseas with all of the brutalities, perils, and tragedies it typically involved. Beyond question, these OSS operatives and their European assets deserve universal respect and gratitude for the difficult and hazardous duties they performed. To a person, they demonstrated extraordinary bravery and courage, endured incredible hardships, and made enormous sacrifices. The increasing popularity of the oral history interview genre is welcome for the rich individual perspective it provides, a perspective that is often

missing from histories derived solely from archival research. In this regard, O'Donnell's work is a useful contribution to the existing literature, and one that many will find fascinating.

Unfortunately, these wonderful oral histories are poorly packaged. As a result, O'Donnell's effort disappoints in many ways. Properly utilized, the oral history interviews, and this book, could have had much greater value for both historians and casual readers.

Oral history can illuminate, but it can also obfuscate. Sadly, the portrait of the OSS presented here is one dimensional, telling only the well-known, often over-romanticized “cloak and dagger” aspect of the Service's history that perpetuates the popular myth that this is all that intelligence agencies do—a myth that decades of scholarship has sought to overcome. There is not much new or really unknown here, contrary to what the title suggests. Most of these operations are covered in existing histories, or are accessible in the extensive OSS collections housed since 1975 at the National Archives.

Following two cursory introductory chapters on well-trod aspects of OSS origins, recruitment, and training, O'Donnell summarizes the now familiar shadow war in North Africa, Sicily and Italy, Greece and the Balkans, France during Operations Overlord and Anvil-Dragoon, and finally the 1945 clandestine operations within the Third Reich. OSS activities in China, the China-Burma-India Theater, the Southeast Asia Command, or elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific, receive fewer than 15 pages of narrative. And descriptions of some exploits that had significant postwar and Cold War importance in that half of the world, such as the Dixie and Deer Missions in China and Indochina, respectively, are left out altogether.

O'Donnell's emphasis on letting the operatives tell their stories without careful editing, and without historical context, results in a lopsided view. The author fails to discriminate between what is important and what is mundane in the interviews he collected. He includes one extensive quotation after another, vignette after vignette, page after page. Missed is the opportunity to incorporate these interesting first-person accounts into a broader organizational and operational context that would give readers a more realistic and accurate understanding of what the approximately 13,000-member OSS accomplished in this global conflict involving tens of millions of combatants and what it failed to do.

The vital contributions of many OSS branches and offices are missing in

this work. Little mention is made of the 900-member Research and Analysis Branch, for example, which the author mistakenly believes acted in merely a supporting role to the overall OSS effort. It is an oddly dismissive treatment when even Director William J. Donovan himself recognized, as have many historians, that the bulk of useable OSS intelligence originated not from espionage or covert operations abroad, but from R&A scholars doing rather unglamorous open-source research at the Library of Congress and the National Archives. The author further asserts that “the OSS played a key role in the Allied victory” (xviii), a claim contrary to most interpretations that acknowledge the importance of the OSS, but provide the proper historical perspective that this was a very small organization in what was a very big war. Nothing is introduced here to convince this reviewer that the claim that “Historians have tended to relegate OSS to a sideshow, suggesting that it made little difference in the war's outcome” (xviii) is anything but accurate, as consistently revealed in the many existing works on the subject. The most important OSS contributions were not espionage, or covert operations, or support to resistance movements that never seriously contested Axis control of Europe or Asia during World War II, but in its demonstration that a centralized intelligence agency capable of providing early warning of enemy attack, based on all-source collection and analysis, was a vital component of American foreign policy and military affairs—a realization that resulted in the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency in September 1947.

Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs contains numerous factual errors. The OSS, for example, did not operate in every theater of the war as O'Donnell claims (15). Gen. Douglas MacArthur excluded OSS members from the Southwest Pacific Area unless they served under his direct command, an option Donovan refused. Adm. Chester Nimitz followed a similar policy in the US Navy-controlled North, Central, and South Pacific theaters, allowing only a few members of the Morale Operations Branch to accompany Office of War Information propagandists to Saipan late in the war, and an even smaller number of OSS men to participate under US Navy command in one underwater demolition team (15). In Europe, the US Fifth Army liberated Rome on 5 June 1944, not 3 June (65). It is Walt Rostow, not Walter (25). CBS radio personality Elmer Davis directed the Office of War Information, not playwright and former White House speechwriter Robert Sherwood, who served as deputy director of the OWI's Overseas Branch from 1942 until 1944 (229). The OSS Special Liaison Units merely laundered and distributed ULTRA intelligence to field commanders—they had no role in signals interception and decryption, being denied access to Britain's

Bletchley Park until quite late in the war (200). A Military Order created the OSS on 13 June 1942, placing it within the nation's military establishment subordinate to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and above the theater commanders, not Executive Order 9182, which established the Office of War Information on that same date (229).

Undocumented assertions also abound. Many military and intelligence historians, for example, will find O'Donnell's claim that "OSS commandos were America's first Special Forces" (58) surprising, as the US Army had already signed agreements with the British in April 1942 to train Americans as commandos, and the first US Army ranger units formed that June, the same month the OSS came into being. The assertion that "OSS played a major role in the Nuremberg war crimes trial" (307) is neither elaborated upon nor documented. This seems especially odd considering that President Truman dissolved the OSS in September 1945, nearly two months before the 10-month long trials began in late November 1945. The statement that OSS Special Operations Branch and British Special Operations Executive personnel "delayed and considerably damaged the 2d SS Panzer Division 'Das Reich' as it struggled from the south of France to counter the Normandy landings" (169) is one of many exaggerations. In this particular case, only a few OSS members were even in the region at the time. O'Donnell completely ignores the fact that French resistance groups, acting independently of the OSS, SOE, and even of each other, were the forces vainly struggling to slow the division's northward movement, posing such an annoyance that the SS massacred the innocent inhabitants of Oradour-sur-Glane on 10 June 1944 in retaliation. A final overgeneralization is the author's assertion that the Ardennes counteroffensive of mid-December 1944—the Battle of the Bulge—occurred as it did because the US First Army had "deprived itself of its own eyes and ears" by dismissing its OSS contingent (169). This assumes, of course, that one small OSS group had exclusive intelligence unbeknownst to the rest of Allied intelligence—from the theater level to frontline foxholes—and could have sufficiently impressed a military hierarchy suspicious of the civilian-dominated OSS with the accuracy of its information in time to issue an early warning to hundreds of Allied units poised on the German frontier. No proof is offered here that these OSS intelligence officers had any such information.

The book contains several photographs from the National Archives and private collections, a helpful glossary—notwithstanding some errors—and a number of very good maps that help place veterans' stories in geographical context.